

Nadia Stefko  
Sermon for Maundy Thursday  
John 13:1-17,31b-35  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
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The Spanish mystic Saint John of the Cross once said that silence is God's first language. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Jesus preaches his final sermon in silence, kneeling at the feet of his disciples.

These great 3 days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday are about listening for God in the silence.

It's a time to slow things down, and linger with Jesus in his hardest hours. But this slowing down and finding God's silence does not come naturally for many of us.

I'll admit, I'm finding it next to impossible this year.

I'm distracted by the constant needs of my infant and toddler daughters...  
I'm overwhelmed by the moving boxes piled high in our apartment--  
I'm sort of grossly mesmerized by the manhunt that continues in Belgium...

My mind is all over the place this week, and so when I came to tonight's gospel, one of the first things I noticed is that Jesus seems pretty distracted and overwhelmed too at the beginning of tonight's story.

Great throngs have been pouring into Jerusalem for the Passover festival.

And given his recent spike in popularity, Jesus could hardly walk down the street without the crowds waving tree branches and shouting their praises at him.

Pilgrims and tourists were coming up to the disciples and begging them for a chance just to SEE Jesus.

It's all a bit too much for the Son of God, who prefers to speak in silence. So right before tonight's story picks up, Jesus escapes from the crowd, and goes into hiding.

\* \* \*

The next time we see him, Jesus is at dinner with his closest friends.  
And he does a funny thing:  
He gets up from the table, takes off his robe, and quietly starts to wash their feet.

Tonight--for Jesus AND for us--is about laying things aside, and pulling down any barriers that might distract us from Listening for God's silence in these three holy days.

After communion tonight, we will dim the lights.

We'll put away the chalices and torches. And we will strip the altar bare.

We will shift our attention from the sanctuary to the quiet garden where we can keep watch with Jesus.

But first, before we do any of that, we lay aside our socks and shoes.

And we step into  
the quiet weird-ness  
of washing feet.

Foot washing is not an easy thing for most of us to be a part of:  
It's awkward to have our feet handled by someone who isn't our parent, or spouse, or a hired caregiver;

And it's a vulnerable thing, to kneel in front of another person--we feel small; and maybe a little off balance...and I never know just how hard to scrub in a liturgical foot washing. (I thought maybe they'd reveal that one to us in seminary, but I was wrong.)

It's not easy, but we do it every year because Jesus is really clear about how important it is that his followers keep doing it!

What Jesus' sermon lacks in word count tonight, it makes up for in clarity:  
"If I have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.  
I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you..."

So on the one hand, Foot washing is not easy...  
but on the other hand, it's not exactly difficult either.  
All you need is your hands, a towel, some water...and some FEET.

And the feet can belong to just about anybody. Jesus washed his friends' feet.  
But the feet you wash, or the hands that wash your feet, don't have to be your friends'.

After all, the people whose feet Jesus washed were not JUST his friends...  
They were also his students, and he was their teacher.  
In those days, it was common for students to wash their teacher's feet as a sign of deference and respect. But for the teacher to wash the students' feet was a real upending of the social norm.

SO, if you're interested in how following Jesus involves challenging social structures that assign some kinds of people more dignity or worth than others...

then *come forward! Wash and be washed.*

The people whose feet Jesus washed were not JUST his friends...  
They were also the ones who would fall asleep on him a few hours later in the garden,  
when he begged them to stay awake, when he needed them the most.

SO, if you've ever let somebody down...or if you've ever been disappointed in a time of  
need...then *come forward! Wash and be washed.*

The feet Jesus washed included Peter's.  
Peter, who would stand in the High Priest's courtyard later that night and deny that he  
even knew Jesus.

SO, if you've ever played up or played down your relationships for personal gain...  
or if you've ever had your heart broken by someone denying the closeness you once  
felt... then *come forward! Wash and be washed.*

The feet Jesus washed this night included Judas's.  
Judas--who Jesus knew was about to hand him over...  
*and whose feet he knelt and washed anyway.*

SO, if you've ever acted in bad faith...  
or if you've ever felt betrayed by someone you made yourself vulnerable to...  
then *come forward! Wash and be washed.*

\* \* \*

The message Jesus preaches tonight in the washing of all those feet  
is the GOOD news of God's unconditional love made manifest.

This love IS the New Commandment (the *maundatum novum*)--  
the very legacy of this holy night.

By this everyone will know that we are his disciples:  
if we show forth the love that he showed, in the silence,  
with his hands and a towel, and a water jug.

So come. Bring your hands, and your feet--  
to wash and be washed, and to share the good news.

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"The Word became flesh, that our flesh may become word.  
Our flesh, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can reveal to people their value --  
that they are cherished and loved by God."  
~Jean Vanier